

**An oration delivered before the Philadelphia Medical Society, pursuant to appointment / by George B. Wood.**

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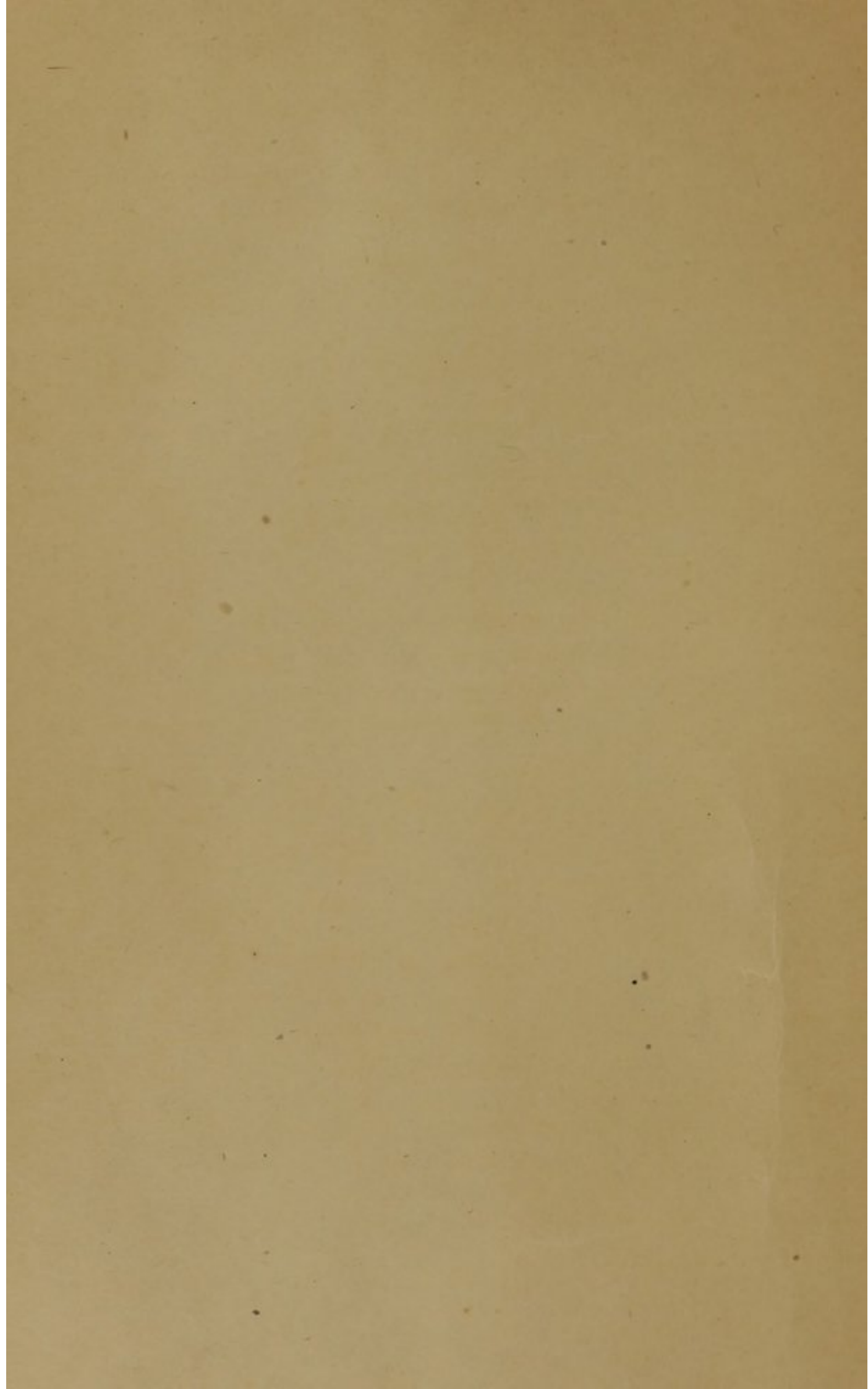


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Wood (Geo. B.)

An oration, delivered  
before the Philadelphia  
Medical Society x x x x x  
Feb. 14 - 1824





*Nathan M. Smith M.D.*

**AN ORATION**

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

PHILADELPHIA MEDICAL SOCIETY,

PURSUANT TO APPOINTMENT.

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**BY GEORGE B. WOOD, M. D.**  
HONORARY MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY.

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*February 14, 1824.*

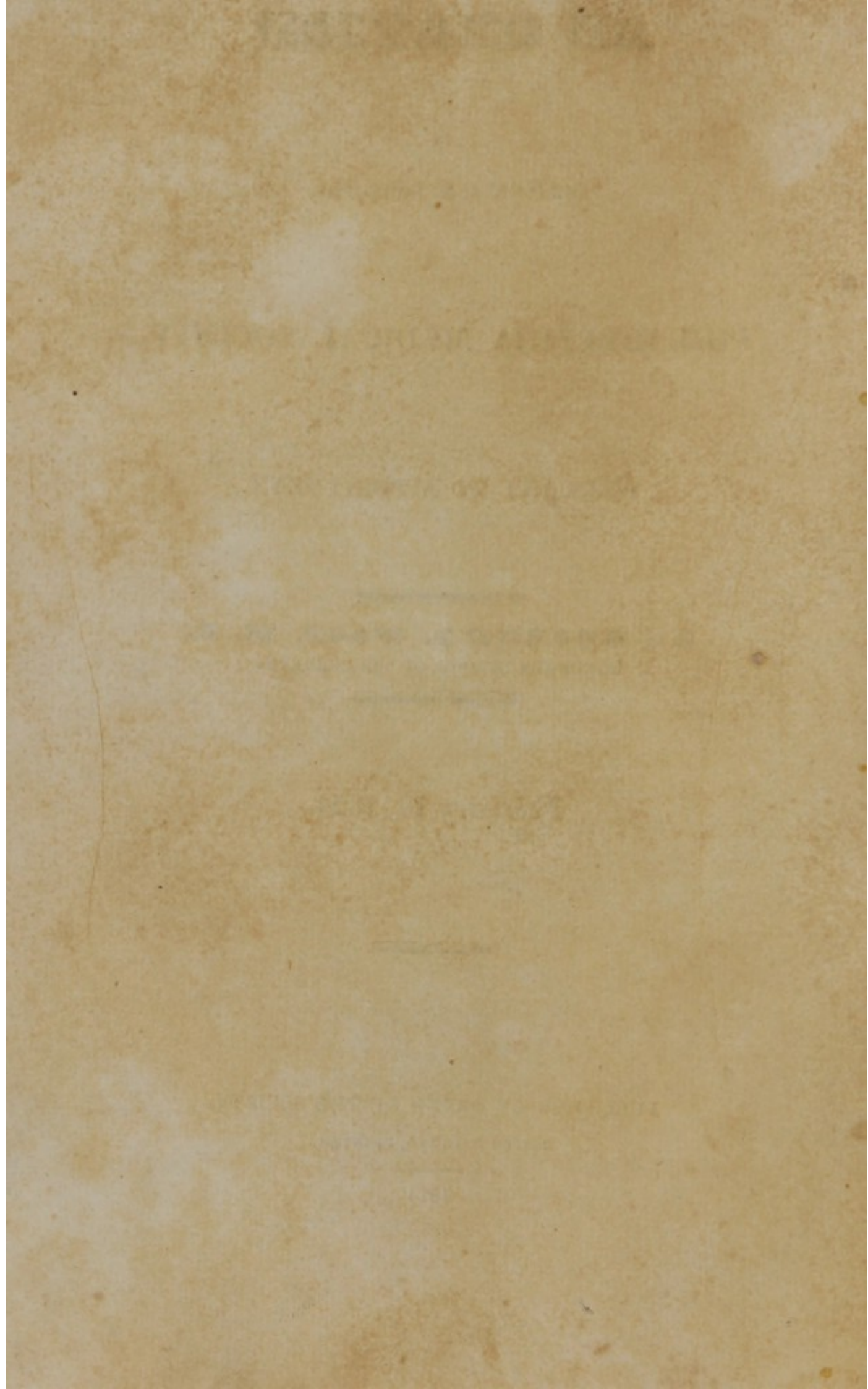
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1824





## ORATION.



*Gentlemen of the Philadelphia Medical Society—*

CHOSEN by the Medical Society to deliver their anniversary oration for the present year, I appear before you, on this occasion, to fulfil the object of my appointment. For the selection of a subject, a wide field is presented; no less than the whole extent of medical science, literature and practice: but, wide as it is, there remains scarcely a single portion unexplored and unappropriated by those who have preceded me; and, on any one point, to strike out views which shall possess the merit, at the same time, of novelty, correctness and interest, would require a stretch of intellect, and a depth of reflection of which few can boast, and to which, certainly, I do not pretend to assert a claim. All that I propose to accomplish, is to exhibit, in a clear light, some of the facts, arguments and illustrations which others may have discovered or advanced; and if, therefore, in the subsequent discourse, any one should recognize reflections with which reading or conversation may have rendered him familiar, let him not hastily condemn me of desiring to shine in borrowed plumes, or of seeking that applause which is due only to originality.



The condition of the medical profession in the country he inhabits, must be an object of deep interest to every practitioner; at least, to all those who can extend their views beyond the little circle of their own selfish wants, and feel a generous pride in that kind of honour, which the advancement of a profession in dignity and importance sheds over each individual of its members. In the breast of every man of correct feeling resides a principle, which will never suffer him to regard, with complacency, the degradation of any body to which he may belong, nor, without pleasure, to witness its exaltation; and the *esprit du corps*, while it often serves as a most powerful incitement to strenuous and persevering exertion, is also one of the best preservatives against mean and dishonourable conduct. Among medical men, this feeling should be cherished with assiduous care; as there is no profession or business, with the general reputation of which, the private interest of its members, and the prosperity of the community at large are more closely connected. They are bound together by no ordinary ties:—the health and consequently the happiness of our fellow men, the estimation in which we ourselves may be held in society, the internal satisfaction of our minds, are all more or less dependent, not only upon our individual efforts as practitioners of medicine, but also upon our concurrent endeavours, as members of the profession, to improve and



amplify its resources, and elevate its character. Can I, therefore, occupy to greater advantage the short period during which I am to appear before you, than by directing your attention to some circumstances, connected with the state of our profession, as it at present exists in this country, which are loudly calling for our prompt and efficient interference.

My object is not to eulogize. Much has been said of the improvements which medicine has derived from American genius; much, of the great talents, and splendid attainments of certain illustrious practitioners, either now living, or but a short time removed from the stage of action; and our prevalent modes of practice, which, like a thousand fertilizing streams have issued from their wisdom and experience, are the subjects of panegyric to almost every pen that writes, and every tongue that speaks on this fruitful topic of discourse. Far be it from me to undervalue those great men, of whom all Americans may justly boast as their countrymen. I revere them as patriarchs in the profession; and I estimate the fruits of their labour as a rich and most precious legacy, bequeathed by them to a country which should forever be grateful. But our ears have been too long accustomed to the sweet sounds of praise. We are too much inclined, to appropriate to ourselves a portion of that credit, which the conduct of a few eminent men has attached to the



profession; to recline under the laurels which their hands have planted; to float along the stream which their genius first put in motion, and attribute to our own feeble effort that progress occasioned solely by the current. My intention is rather to point out faults, than to discover excellencies. An acquaintance with the latter, may bring us the good opinion of others; but it is only by our own knowledge of the former, and their consequent amendment, that we can render ourselves fully deserving and secure of that good opinion.

From the remotest periods of authentic history, a liberal education has always been considered an essential pre-requisite to entering upon the study of medicine, with the best prospects of success. Among the greatest advantages derived from that early discipline, which the mind receives in the acquisition of knowledge, is the command it is enabled to exert over its own actions, the ability to call in, at pleasure, its loose and wandering thoughts, and fix them with the closest attention upon any subject of study, or investigation. This ability, in which they who have long neglected mental cultivation, are, in general, exceedingly deficient, is of inappreciable importance, both to the student who aspires to an acquaintance with what is already known in the science of medicine, and to the practitioner who is called on to investigate disease, and from the sources of his knowledge



and judgment to provide measures of relief. But other very important consequences result from a well regulated education. The studies of morals, philosophy, history and the belles-lettres, serve not only to expand the mind by increasing its stores of thought, and to invigorate the intellectual faculties by the exercise they afford them, but also have a tendency to regulate the imagination, and to establish a certain tone of feeling and moral sentiment, which dignifies while it embellishes the character of its possessor. A practising physician must often necessarily come in contact with men of well informed and discerning minds, whose only criterion of his medical abilities, must be the estimation which they form of his talents and attainments in those branches of knowledge, in which they can meet him on equal ground. Independently, therefore, of a *character* for learning, which by long prescription is attached to the medical profession, and without which, to a greater or less extent, every practitioner must sink in public estimation, his reputation for skill in his own peculiar art is, in some measure, dependent on his attainments as a general scholar. Nor is there any class of men, who are called upon by more powerful motives to cultivate their moral taste, and establish in their own minds a high tone of correct and honourable feeling. They are brought into association with both sexes, and all classes of men, from the highest to the lowest,



from the best to the most abandoned, from the wisest to the most wretchedly ignorant; not that kind of association, which all members of a social community are occasionally under the necessity of forming, which continues but for a moment, and penetrates no deeper than the surface, but an association in which, on one side at least, the inmost secrets of the breast are often revealed, and an individual throws himself into your arms, with the greatest unreservedness, and the most unbounded confidence. It may readily be conceived how many circumstances must occur, in which refinement and delicacy of feeling, and high sentiments of honour will be necessary to convey the physician through, without disgrace to himself, without injury or offence to his patient: and I think it will be granted, that though these virtues may sometimes be the growth of a soil rich by nature, yet, as a general rule, they flourish best in a mind cultivated by study and reflection. If the foundation for such cultivation be not laid, in an early and well regulated education, the plants which would otherwise ripen into flowers of the fairest hue and sweetest fragrance, often become withered in the bud, and sometimes run up into unsightly and noxious weeds. It will, therefore, I think be granted, that, if not absolutely essential, a liberal education is at least very desirable to every student of medicine, and that none should present themselves at the portals of the temple,



who cannot exhibit this token of their qualification for admittance.

But what is the real condition of things in the United States? Is the profession stocked with men of literature and science? Do the young candidates for medical honours come forward, well prepared by previous exercise for the laborious task upon which they are about to enter? I fear, that in this respect, as a general rule, we have little to boast of. Even they who have been most assiduous in their preparatory studies, and have been favoured with the fairest opportunities to profit by their assiduity, are yet, by the peculiar condition of society, incident to a country so new as ours, compelled to begin their medical career at such an age, that to render them accomplished scholars, more than ordinary talent must have been united with their industry and application. This, however, is an evil dependent upon causes, which can be removed only by the slow operation of time. When our country shall have attained such a state of permanent wealth, that individuals about to engage in medical pursuits, shall not be under the necessity of hastening through their period of preparation, in order to supply themselves with bread by their professional labours, then, and not till then, may we reasonably expect, that deep erudition will be a characteristic of the practitioners of the United States.

But I regret to say, that of the numerous young



*hopes of* men allured into the study of medicine by their honour and profit, too many have not even availed themselves of the advantages which almost every learned seminary affords, and which are seldom unattainable by the diligent and persevering. Not only a total ignorance of the languages of Greece and Rome, which, though highly ornamental and important, are by some eminent men considered as by no means essential qualifications; but, in some instances, an entire want of any other education than what consists in the very rudiments of school learning, constitutes no obstacle whatever to the youth, who, urged by parental fondness and partiality, or by his own ambition and unwillingness to labour, determines to become a doctor; and at once dashes headlong into the course which has conducted a Rush, a Wistar, and a Physic to such enviable eminence. But he enters with all his mental faculties stiffened by inaction, and paralyzed by neglect. The rusted wheels turn slowly and laboriously, impeded as well by the inequalities and ruggedness of an unprepared road, as by their own imperfection. His progress in the attainment of medical knowledge must therefore be exceeding slow, and, at the end of the regular period, unfit as he necessarily must be, he goes forth to encounter disease, and proves, I fear not unfrequently, more an auxiliary than an antagonist.

I do not, however, wish to be understood as ad-



vancing the opinion, that no one can ever become a deservedly distinguished physician, without the assistance of a good previous education. There are certainly men so endowed by nature with extraordinary gifts, that no force of circumstances can entirely repress the energy of their native talent. Their minds are like ~~a piece~~<sup>a</sup> of gold, which can never rust. However long they may remain inactive, and exposed to the operation of causes which tarnish and corrode an ordinary intellect, they still retain their brightness and polish; and when called into operation, move as quickly and energetically as others are enabled to do only by a state of constant exercise. These, however, will be admitted by all as rare exceptions to a very general law; and no one can plead a right to the exception in his own favour. But even to men of extraordinary talent, a previous education is of vast advantage, by giving to their minds a proper direction, and enabling them to employ, in the immediate work of the edifice, that time which they would otherwise be necessitated to spend, in clearing away the rubbish and digging for the foundation.

It cannot but happen that individuals, whose ignorance on ordinary subjects of science and literature is notorious, when they shall have passed the usual ordeal, and assumed a rank among regular practitioners, shall, in some measure, influence the general estimation of the profession.

*+ pure*



Independently therefore of the duty, which as good citizens we owe the public, the honour of our calling, and of course our individual interest should induce us, as speedily as possible, to apply a remedy to this serious evil. Let us jointly discourage from embarking in the profession, all such as are likely to disgrace it by their ignorance; and when consulted, as we not unfrequently are, by parents or guardians as to the destination of the youth under their care, let us conscientiously state our conviction, that without a good education, they will in general be much better qualified for success in some other line of business; and that, as physicians, they will probably be less honoured and esteemed than as practisers of an art, in which their want of information will not seem in such glaring opposition to their actual employment.

We will now direct our attention to the course of medical studies, considered as preparatory to an immediate entrance upon the practical duties of the profession; and here again, I am apprehensive that we shall find subject for complaint.

Without incurring the imputation of vanity, I think we can truly say, that in no country are more ample means afforded for the acquisition of medical knowledge than in our own. We have numerous schools, the professorships of which are many of them filled by men who have long stood forth in the very front of their profession, and by native talent, as well as by long experience, are



well calculated to perform their task with honour to themselves and profit to their hearers. We have, also, hospitals and other public institutions, where the student can witness an exemplification in practice, of what he has read in books, or heard in the schools. Whatever, in the various branches of science, theoretical or practical, transpires in the European world, is brought to our own shores as rapidly as the winds can bear it; and is instantly conveyed, in the almost numberless vehicles which are constantly issuing from the press in our Atlantic cities, to every corner of the union. Few, therefore, are without the means of improvement if disposed to employ them.

But in our profession, as in others, there prevails too generally an eagerness to commence the practical business of life, and the time devoted to preparation is consequently made as short as the regulations of those institutions will admit, under whose auspices the young candidate is to be ushered into public notice. Indeed, judging from the method pursued by many in the prosecution of their studies, the honour of a degree in medicine is to them far more estimable, than the knowledge itself, of which the degree should be considered only as an evidence. To become a learned physician and a good practitioner, requires a long course of diligent application to study, together with a close observation of the actual appearances presented by the sick, and the effects of remedial



treatment. Having acquainted himself thoroughly with the preliminary sciences, such as anatomy, physiology, chemistry, materia medica and pharmacy, upon which the whole superstructure of medicine is supported, the student should next investigate the morbid states of the system, and the application of remedies to their relief. For this purpose he should resort, in the first place, to the experience of others, and diligently peruse the works of those practical authors, whose reputation for accuracy of observation, correctness of judgment, and truth of description is most firmly established. Not content with a hasty perusal of one or two general systems of pathology and therapeutics, he should select the most approved treatises on each disease, compare with impartiality the statements, opinions and modes of practice of different authors, and in his own mind determine upon some course, which to the best of his judgment, may seem to be the safest and most effectual. But I appeal to the experience of those who now hear me, whether this plan is pursued, as a general rule, with sufficient diligence. Is it not, on the contrary, a too prevailing custom, during the three years term of study prescribed by the regulations of our University, to depend upon the necessarily imperfect information to be derived from lectures, and the perusal of a very few general systems, known by the appropriate name of *Text-books* ! It would seem, from the rapidity



with which the ground is travelled over, as if the study of medicine were a race course, and a degree the goal, which it is the highest ambition of each individual to attain. In the immediate splendour of this highly valued prize, the whole prospect beyond it seems to be obscured; or if a glimpse should now and then be obtained, it soon fades away from the sight, and is forgotten. Frequently therefore it must happen, when the grand object of his immediate hopes is secured, and the student now goes forth regularly authorized to distribute among his fellow-men health or sickness, happiness or misery, life or death, that he feels himself entering upon an unknown navigation, surrounded by innumerable perils he had never foreseen, and every moment liable to shipwreck upon some hidden rock.

But even allowing that he has industriously occupied the whole of the allotted period, and stored his mind with all that is valuable in the recorded experience of others, he must still remain unqualified as a medical practitioner. To treat diseases with the greatest probability of success, it is absolutely necessary, not only to have studied what the best authors have written on each of them, but also to be familiar with the symptoms they actually present; to have observed by the bed side their changes, progress and termination; and to have watched attentively the effects of medicine in controuling, relieving and curing



them. The student may walk the regular rounds of the hospitals, cast a hasty glance at the patient as he passes, note the remarks which fall from the practitioner, and come forth little wiser than he entered. Something more than all this is requisite. Shaking off that selfish unwillingness experienced naturally by all men, to encounter scenes disagreeable to their feelings, he is bound to search out disease in its various forms of pain and loathsomeness, and danger; and in pursuit of this object, not only to enter the public receptacles of the infirm and destitute, but also to dive into the private abodes of poverty and wretchedness, where sickness united with neglect, presents to the sensitive mind the most appalling image of suffering humanity. Controuling emotions which such spectacles cannot but excite in every breast, he must concentrate all the powers of his mind in the one faculty of observation. Each morbid symptom should be noted accurately, both by itself and in connexion with other symptoms; the slightest alteration, with its causes and premonitory signs, should be minutely examined; the immediate and remote effects of particular remedies, and general plans of treatment should be carefully observed, and discriminated from the casual or regular changes; and from the very commencement of the attack to its termination either in recovery or death, not a single circumstance should be allowed to pass unnoticed, by which one ray of light



could be thrown upon the frequently obscure and intricate march of the disease. A spy in the camp of the enemy, the student must be constantly on his guard, watching each preparatory movement, each signal for operation, each change of position, and from all these circumstances endeavour, while he calculates their strength, to penetrate their designs. Not content with a minute examination of individual cases, he should compare them together, ascertain what is peculiar to each, what is common to many, and thus draw general conclusions applicable to whole classes of disease. He will now feel himself, in some measure, competent to decide between the frequently discrepant statements of authors, and to adopt such a course as his own observation may unite with the testimony of others, to point out to him as likely to be the most secure. How infinitely superior are his advantages when thus accomplished, over those of another, who possesses no such clue to guide him through the intricacies of the unexplored region he is about to enter. What has been the experience of those, who have commenced the practice of medicine with such information only, as can be derived from the perusal of books, and attendance upon lectures? When first called to the sick bed, and compelled to take upon themselves the awful responsibility attached to the practice of their art, have they not felt as travellers in a strange country, on every side en-



compassed with difficulties, at every turn encountered by dangers, with no other means of extrication than what is afforded them by the recollection of descriptions, frequently imperfect and discordant, between which, and the real face of things, they are often prevented by their own anxiety and agitation from discovering any resemblance? In the commencement of our experience, there is not one of us, however well prepared, provided he has been duly sensible of the weight of his responsibility, who has not experienced more or less embarrassment in conducting the treatment of diseases. How exceedingly distressing, therefore, must the situation be to a young physician, who is aware of his own incompetence. The first step has been taken, and a regard for his reputation, forbids him to retreat. The patient is before him, surrounded perhaps by his friends and connexions, all looking anxiously to the conduct of one, to whose care and management they have confided their dearest treasure. He makes his enquiries, examines the tongue, the skin, the pulse, endeavours to collect his thoughts, and to put on the semblance of composure; but his mind is one chaos of confusion. The appearances of the case before him, vague recollections of what he has read or heard of similar complaints, fluctuating notions as to the proper plan of management, mingled with the appalling ideas of risk to his patient's life and danger to his own reputation, are



all tossed about in his bewildered thoughts, like the fragments of a wreck in the sea. But he is under the necessity of acting. Without power to observe, to compare, or reflect, he pushes desperately and almost blindly forward, not careless of the consequences, but wholly unable to avert them. He prescribes. Accidentally, the prescription may be efficacious; but more frequently it will be useless, perhaps worse than useless. It is true, that by degrees, as his experience extends, he will acquire more skill and confidence; but through how much suffering to his patients, and self-condemnation will he have attained that point at which he should have started; and how fearful will be the retrospective views he will often necessarily cast over that gloomy portion of his progress, peopled as it must be by the reproaches of others, and his own better recollections. ~~The~~ student, therefore, I may be permitted to say, as he would cherish a good reputation, and a self-approving conscience; as he would avoid the infliction of irremediable evil on his best and kindest friends, for such are they who in general feel most willing to confide their health to his untried ability, let him to the utmost of his power improve every opportunity of acquiring practical knowledge; let him in a subordinate capacity learn to navigate with safety, before attempting himself to guide the vessel in a voyage,

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which, though of incalculable importance, is, however, beset with almost numberless perils.

Proceeding in the path of examination, we now come to that point of our progress, where the whole extent of medical practice opens before us, and presents for our consideration, mingled with much that is laudable, no little that deserves our marked disapprobation. But this, I am well aware, is uncertain and dangerous ground; and requires, perhaps, a more cautious and well-guarded course, than is exactly compatible with the years and standing of him who is now addressing you. Undeviating rectitude of conduct is generally demanded of those who presume to censure; and instruction comes with more grace, and infinitely greater effect, when sanctioned by age and experience. So strong, moreover, is the interest I feel in the honour of my profession, so intense my anxiety that it may stand high in the esteem of the world, and deserve that standing, that I am disposed not only to conceal from others any dark spots which may blemish its purity, but even to shut my own eyes against them. From what has been said, however, it must be too evident, that many of us are admitted within the pale of the fraternity, whose state of preparation is ill-calculated to elevate, or even to support its present reputation for dignity and usefulness. Yet to these a chance is still afforded, by the diligent application of ~~the~~ the whole time and all their mental

*their*



resources, to repair, in great measure, the effects of early negligence, or to supply the less blameable deficiencies which may have resulted from their stunted fortune or defective opportunities. Even they who may justly vindicate to themselves the credit of a high state of preparation, are by no means exempt from the duty of an unceasing solicitude for improvement; how much more incumbent is this duty upon such, as cannot but acknowledge the imperfection of their attainments! Playing at a game of such momentous importance, in which the irretrievable loss is not so much their own, as that of their fellow-men, how can they reconcile to their feelings, that carelessness and want of skill which must frequently insure a failure! Lost indeed must that physician be to every finer feeling of our nature, as well as to all sense of conscience and accountability, who, convinced of his unfitness to combat disease, carelessly beholds its ravages among those who by fortune or their own choice are entrusted to his keeping, and makes scarcely a single effort more fully to qualify himself for their protection. Few, very few, I sincerely believe, have attained this pinnacle of depravity. Neglect of improvement is much more commonly attributable to a vain satisfaction with our present competence, than to a total disregard of those duties, which cannot be violated without a dereliction of all moral and religious principle. It is true, that the same evils



to the community result in either case, and, therefore, for the public good, carelessness and presumption should be equally avoided:—yet, in the moral accountability of the individual there is undoubtedly a vast difference, as great almost as between the accidental homicide and the murderer.

Without presuming to point out any general, much less any individual misconduct in the members of the profession, I may be allowed to ask a few pertinent questions.—

Have we, as practitioners of the healing art, laboured to qualify ourselves well in our vocation, and do we still continue solicitously to improve every opportunity both for our own advancement in skill and knowledge, and for extending the usefulness, by adding to the resources of our profession?

Are we conscientious in the discharge of our practical duties, devoting to the sick all that time, attention and exercise of thought, which the case not unfrequently demands; postponing to the good of our patients every private gratification whether of indolence or active pleasure; and considering always that we have assumed a most important charge, for the slightest neglect of which we are accountable, not only to our own conscience and to public opinion, but at a much higher tribunal, the judgment of which is always just, and its sentence irrevocable?



At the same time that we exercise our utmost skill in the treatment of the disease, are we careful to use tenderness towards the subject of its attack, bearing with the infirmities and soothing the asperities of his afflicted spirit; and, when our efforts to cure prove abortive, alleviating as much as possible the sufferings he must endure, and lightening, by every consolation in our power to administer, the terrible blow that must inevitably fall upon him?

Do we cherish those sentiments of honour and morality, which, in the intimate and confidential intercourse we must necessarily hold with all classes of people, will prove our only shield against temptations, often too powerful to be withstood by an unbalanced or perverted mind?

Finally, in our intercourse with each other, do we avoid those petty jealousies, miserable disputes and vile intrigues, which, though naturally arising from our frequently conflicting interests, can have no other tendency, than to lower the tone of our moral feeling, and degrade us in the estimation of the world:—on the contrary, are we solicitous to cultivate in ourselves a kindly feeling towards our professional brethren, and by acts of courtesy and friendship to inspire them with reciprocal dispositions; and still further, do we endeavour to promote, to the extent of our influence, that union of sentiment and harmony of action among all our medical friends, indepen-



dently of which, however respectable each individual may be, the profession itself can never attain that high standing, to which it is undoubtedly entitled?

I am convinced there are many who can safely answer these questions in the affirmative: and is it too much to hope, that at some future and not distant period, their numbers may be so augmented as to embrace the great majority of those, who may regularly enlist themselves under the banners of medicine?

Connected with the subject at present before us, is the consideration of an evil, less injurious indeed to physicians than to the community in general, which, however, as guardians of the public health, we are bound to use our best endeavours either to lessen, or entirely remove.

From the very nature of medical practice, in which every prescription is the result of a process of reasoning or reflection in the mind of the physician, seldom understood, and often unintelligible by those around him; and in which the properties and mode of operation of the remedy, can be known only to those who have made them the subject of particular investigation, it must be evident that no one is competent to decide upon the merits of the treatment, and of course upon those of the practitioner, except such as have undergone the same initiation into the principles of the healing art. Even the result, which, in other



professions, is generally an unfailing criterion of the skill employed to produce it, in ours either fails entirely, or affords but imperfect grounds of judgment. Nature is very frequently an all-sufficient physician, and sometimes is enabled, not only to contend successfully against the force of disease, but even to struggle through all those difficulties which are placed in her way by the officious interference of art. Seldom, however, does she receive the credit due to her, from the ill-judging witnesses of her operations; and not unfrequently beholds all their praise and gratitude bestowed upon that hand, which interposed only to derange her plans and impede her progress. On her head, moreover, is frequently heaped all the blame in cases of failure. The grave sooner or later must receive its tribute; and except in cases of most palpable negligence and misconduct, the practitioner, though perhaps he may have acted as the very minister of death, is shielded from public censure by the broad ægis of public ignorance. I need not observe that the very reverse may happen, and that cures <sup>e</sup>ffected by the most exquisite combination of judgment and foresight, may be attributed to some contemptible empyrical interference; while inevitable failures are laid at the doors of the physicians as crimes of ignorance or inattention. I have heard an eminent practitioner, deservedly the boast of this city, I might say of America, when speaking of cures he had effected by long care



and assiduous attention, declare, that in many instances, the whole credit had been attributed to some inefficient plaster, prescribed by an old woman, or despicable quack; and that all he had himself gained, was the reputation of having inflicted on the patient a great deal of unnecessary suffering.

Such then being the difficulty, on the part of the people in general, to form, from their own observation, a correct judgment of the qualifications of a medical practitioner, is it to be wondered that men of some address and acquaintance with human nature, who, without one particle of medical knowledge, unblushingly advance their claims to superior skill in the management of disease, should impose on the credulity not only of the vulgar, but of many who may justly be considered as well informed and enlightened men? Is it to be wondered—that those hyenas of society, who devour the substance of the wretched and helpless, and care not how much pain, misery, and desolation mark their progress, so that their own carcasses are glutted with plunder; is it to be wondered that such as these should often triumph in their iniquity, while they laugh at the credulity of the gaping multitude?

It is always an easier task to point out an evil, than to discover and apply a remedy:—but certainly an object of such importance as the cure of this disorder in the good health of society, cannot be totally unattainable. Any attempts of this kind,



however, proceeding from the medical profession, are generally received by the community as self-interested measures, calculated to promote our own views of private emolument, and having little or no reference to the public weal. We are thought to regard the race of quacks as our rivals, and to look upon them with a jaundiced eye. But never was there a more palpable error in public opinion. Believing, as we do, that diseases are often greatly aggravated by their plans of management, and cases, which if brought immediately under the notice of skilful men, would have proved trifling in their nature and of short continuance, become serious and protracted; is it not reasonable, at least when death has not rendered our assistance unnecessary, that we should calculate upon longer attendance and increased emolument, when preceded by these miasmata, engendered at first by the unhealthiness of society, and then, in their turn, engendering and keeping up disease. Our opposition therefore is founded, not on their interference with our private interest, but on the disgrace they bring upon the name of medicine, and on the still better motive of that regard, which as members of the community, we cannot but feel in its well-being and prosperity. But whatever may be the construction placed upon our conduct, it is our duty still to persist in our endeavours, encouraged by the hope, that if we ultimately succeed in eradicating this poison vine that creeps round the healthful tree of medicine, and infects



the neighbouring atmosphere with its own noxious vapours, we shall then be regarded as benefactors of society, though at present liable to misinterpretation and censure.

The only effectual method by which this desirable end can be accomplished, is, that by legislative enactment, the practice of medicine should be confined to such as have undergone at least some preparation; and perhaps no better test could be adopted of the requisite qualifications, than a degree in a medical college, obtained after a regular attendance upon its courses of instruction, and a strict examination before its presiding officers. Such a plan has been put in operation in many countries of Europe; and in several of our own states, analogous restrictions have been legally established:—but in Pennsylvania, high as she stands in the scale of wealth and influence, there is yet so much prejudice, or, if you please, so strong an attachment to perfect freedom in her institutions, that, though in the profession of the law, none are allowed to practice except such as have been regularly examined and admitted, yet the door is thrown widely open to every miserable pretender in medicine; nor have any exertions in her legislature ever been able to procure one solitary restriction upon ignorance and imposition in this important art. It is time for the profession to rouse itself, shake off the lethargy which has too long fettered its exertions, and by the influence which reason strongly urged cannot but have over public opinion, to bring about a change which



will be honourable to ourselves, and a blessing to our country.

Analogous to that bare-faced empiricism which deserves the open reprobation of every honest and enlightened man, is a practice, not less perhaps to be deprecated, which has recently taken root in our own city, and, if not speedily eradicated, promises to spring up with such vigorous growth, as may bid defiance to our most strenuous efforts. Apothecaries, from their familiarity with the sensible properties and general effects of medicines on the system, are sometimes apt to imagine themselves competent as practitioners; and, without the slightest acquaintance with the principles of physiological or pathological science, with no other knowledge of diseases than their names, have ventured, in many instances, to take upon themselves the management of complaints, requiring the utmost skill of the well-educated and experienced physician. In no profession is the advice of the poet, "drink deep or taste not," more applicable than in ours; and that indiscriminating treatment which an apothecary, who has never extended his knowledge beyond the qualities of drugs, must necessarily employ, will often be found exceedingly mischievous. There are few physicians in Philadelphia, who, however bounded their experience, have not met with cases of disease much aggravated if not rendered incurable by such unskilful, such unjustifiable interference. I do not impeach universally the motive of the apothecary:—in most instances, it is probably



good. A person sick and wretchedly poor applies at his door for relief, and without sufficiently weighing the consequences, or considering his own want of the requisite skill, he obeys the impulse of the moment, and, while intending to confer a kindness, inflicts not unfrequently a serious and lasting injury. But I fear that even the excuse of a good motive, cannot always be advanced for thus tampering with human life; and the prospect of an insignificant pecuniary profit is often allowed to outweigh all his scruple of conscience, and all his fears of contingent evil.—We can with difficulty reconcile to our notions of human nature, either that self-sufficiency or that careless disregard of consequences, which can induce a man, otherwise respectable, to rush, without the least preparation, into such a conflict with disease, as, if successful, can yield him little honour or emolument, and if unsuccessful, may redound to his disgrace.

Few professions are more truly respectable than that of pharmacy; few require in their members more science, skill and moral integrity; and, so long as he moves within the proper sphere of his duties, the apothecary may challenge our highest esteem:—but the moment he violates those bounds which the nature of his studies has established, and ventures blindfolded into the career of medical practice, that moment he degrades himself into a quack, and either for his self-conceit or imposture, deservedly loses all claims to the respect and consideration of honourable men.



The narrow limits of the time allotted by custom on occasions like the present, will not admit of further enlargement on this, or other subjects which properly come within the scope of the discourse. I have been able to present you only with a very rapid sketch of those concerns, which are most strongly soliciting your attention and interference. The shadowy forms of many evils have passed in quick succession before you, like unquiet spirits beckoning you to pursuit and investigation. A noble enterprise is offered, no less than the exaltation of our profession in virtue, in knowledge, in usefulness, in all that can dignify and adorn; and thus called on by every motive that can influence a well-constituted mind, let us enlist in the cause of our best energies and most devoted attention. First, let us endeavour to regulate our own thoughts and conduct, thus imparting to the profession that kind of strength which it must derive from individual excellence, and, at the same time, establishing such a character, as will give force to our example and extent to our private influence. Qualified by the conquest of ourselves, let us next exert our whole power in extending among our fellow-members, the dominion of good feeling and correct principles, nor slacken in our efforts, till nothing more that is censurable remain to be subdued. But, so long as accessions to the mass of practitioners are every day received, and new streams continue to pour in polluted waters, our efforts, though strenuous and incessant, must be partial in their effects,



or entirely unavailing. Let us, therefore, ascend to the fountain head and purify the waters at their source. Let our profession no longer be a receptacle for the idle, the ignorant and the profligate. Let the fiery ordeal of admission be such—that from among the mass of applicants, all impurities may be burnt out, or float like dross on the surface and be thrown away; while only the bright and solid metal shall remain, capable of being wrought into forms of the highest beauty and usefulness.

Perhaps I may be thought to be indulging in the reveries of a dream;—forming ideal plans which can never be realized, because requiring a perfection beyond the capabilities of our fallen nature. But, in the pursuit of improvement, we should steadily fix our eye on the very summit; and bearing in mind that precept from the mouth of him who never erred, “be ye perfect,” should allow ourselves no rest in the course, even though the pinnacle for which we toil may seem to recede as we advance, and mountain on mountain rise to prolong our laborious ascent.

Would medical men adopt this principle as the guide of their conduct, considering always that while any thing remains to be done nothing is accomplished, our profession might then shake off those attendant evils, which hang like blighting mists about her, and arrayed in all the splendour of her worth, distributing knowledge on the one hand, health and joy on the other, might stand forth—an object of love and gratitude, and homage to the world.



